



# Information Brief

## Resiliency

*Did you ever wonder why some children raised in “good families” turn out to be “rotten apples”? Or conversely, why do some youngsters raised under the most adverse circumstances grow up problem free and become successful? Some children are just more resilient than others. That is, they have an inner strength that permits them to inhibit problem behavior when in the presence of risk. Studies have identified the specific assets, or protective factors, that contribute to a youngster’s resilience. An understanding of its nature and the strategies that help build resiliency into the lives of our children is very useful as schools join with families and communities to develop socially, emotionally, and behaviorally healthy children and youth.*

**CRITICAL ELEMENTS ADDRESSED:** *Skillful, non-judgmental adults treat students with dignity and respect, using a positive, caring manner.*

- *Positive peer relationships are fostered in an environment that promotes them in the classrooms, in common areas of the school, at school-sponsored activities, and in the community.*
- *Positive and trusting relationships among the adults create an environment of psychological safety for risk taking and experimentation and provide models of appropriate interpersonal behavior.*
- *The school attends to issues of diversity by recognizing and capitalizing on the assets of students and acknowledging their individual differences.*

***We cannot always build the future for our youth,  
but we can build our youth for the future.***

*- Franklin D. Roosevelt*

### INTRODUCTION

Between one-half and two-thirds of all children growing up in families with mentally ill, alcoholic, abusive or criminally involved parents grow up to lead productive lives (ERIC/EECE Newsletter, volume 7, no. 2, Fall 1995). These children could be described as being resilient. They possess the capacity for well being and the ability for healthy transformation and change when faced with overwhelming obstacles.

Linquanti (1992) defines resiliency as that “quality in children who, though exposed to significant stress and adversity in their lives, do not succumb to the school failure, substance abuse, mental health, and juvenile delinquency problems they are at greater risk of experiencing.” Resilience, then, is an interaction between the characteristics of the individual and the environment. What makes a student “resilient” is the relative strength of individual characteristics and external protective processes compared to the influence of risks and vulnerabilities in the environment. In order to foster resilience, researchers and practitioners look to its correlates in the form of protective processes within and around individuals over which we have influence.

Whether we believe that most of us are born with a potential for resilience or that resiliency can develop

as a result of adversity, we can describe certain qualities common to resilient youth, and administrators can support an environment in their schools that allows all children to exercise resilient tendencies.

***At each stage of my life, no matter where I was, I always managed to have one meaningful relationship with an adult — a teacher, a coach, and a Boys and Girls Club counselor. It let me know that someone cared about me. A child can do about anything if the child feels loved and significant in some way.***

*- Resilient Youth*

### WHAT COMMON CHARACTERISTICS DO RESILIENT CHILDREN POSSESS?

Children who have exhibited an ability to overcome adversity prove themselves competent in social situations. They are responsive to the needs and wants of others, flexible regardless of routine, show empathy toward those in need, are able to communicate well and exhibit a sense of humor.

According to Bonnie Bernard, author of *Fostering Resiliency in Kids: Protective Factors in the Family, School, and Community* (1991), our innate capacity for resilience allows for the development of:

1. **Social competence:** responsiveness, flexibility, caring and empathy, communication skills and a sense of humor;
2. **Problem-solving skills:** the ability to plan, to be resourceful in seeking help from others, to think creatively, critically and reflectively;

3. **Critical consciousness:** a reflective awareness of the structures of oppression;
4. **Autonomy:** having a sense of one's own identity and an ability to act independently and to exert some control over one's environment, including a sense of task mastery, internal locus of control, and self-efficacy;
5. **Sense of purpose:** a belief in a bright future, including goal direction, educational aspirations, achievement motivation, persistence, optimism, hopefulness, and a sense of being spiritually connected.

Resilient youth are optimistic about their lives and manifest a sense of purpose, which allows them to gain some control over their own environment. They are self-disciplined and recognize their own strengths while seeing their mistakes as learning experiences.

#### WHAT NEEDS TO BE PROVIDED TO FOSTER RESILIENCY IN YOUTH?

While we often recognize resiliency in youth confronted with at-risk situations, all children will benefit from a school environment that strengthens resilient qualities. Resilient youths believe that they have adults in their lives that are available for support and encouragement. Relationships with caring adults foster positive attitudes and support academic achievement as well as nurturing social competence.

*Instilling these positive feelings in students will not result from pep talks or positive image assemblies, but, rather, from planned educational experiences. Simply put, we must structure opportunities into each child's daily routine that will enable him or her to experience feelings of competence, belonging, usefulness, potency, and optimism.*

- Richard Sagor,  
Washington State University

Specific experiences in the classroom aimed at boosting resilient tendencies will provide youth with evidence of academic competence, a sense of belonging, proof of their contributions to the community and a feeling of empowerment. Administrators can best support resilience in youth by setting high expectations for all students and providing opportunities for meaningful participation in school activities.

#### LEARN MORE ABOUT IT:

- **Web sites:**
  - Resiliency in Action: [www.resiliency.com/recent.html](http://www.resiliency.com/recent.html)
  - The Child and Family Resiliency Research Programme: [www.quasar.ualberta.ca/cfrfp/cfrfp.html](http://www.quasar.ualberta.ca/cfrfp/cfrfp.html)
  - National Network for Family Resiliency: [www.nnfr.org](http://www.nnfr.org)
- **In this Handbook:** See "Success4 Critical Elements" and articles on *Youth Leadership/Youth Empowerment, Character Education, and Service-Learning*. For information beyond the scope of this handbook, see the Resources Section.

#### How can schools create an environment that fosters resiliency in youth?

##### *Services, Strategies and Suggested Training:*

- Identify staff members who are willing to develop appropriate activities surrounding the theme of resiliency for all students. Ask the faculty to brainstorm practices that have the potential for building resiliency.
- Begin your efforts with those teachers who volunteer — implementation will be much more successful, causing other teachers to want to be involved.
- Encourage parents, staff and faculty to identify and encourage each student's individual areas or strength or talent. Allow and enable students to use these talents in the service of others, thus providing an opportunity for the student to discover his or her own strengths and talents.
- Team students with a caring adult, whether it be a volunteering teacher or a community member, who can help them with their academic, social and emotional performance within the school setting.
- Develop partnerships with area colleges, universities, education agencies and health institutions to find the best ways to get families involved in the process.
- Focus on the students' strengths and how to better develop these qualities. In the classroom, prevention strategies can be incorporated that focus on building strengths that are recognized in youth. Such programs include youth courts, mentoring, service-learning, law-related education, and other academic programs that nurture a resiliency attitude.
- Communicate high expectations for all youth and provide support for academic success. Schools that successfully demonstrate to students their individual strengths have higher rates of academic success, as well as lower rates of problem behaviors such as dropping out, drug abuse and teen pregnancy.

- ERIC/EECE Newsletter, volume 7, no. 2, Fall 1995

#### SUMMARY

Although we may or may not be born with a predisposition for resiliency, administrators can provide the basis for a school environment that nurtures resiliency in all youth. Building resiliency in students need not take substantial time from teachers' hectic schedules, and many techniques are likely already part of the teachers' repertoires. Feelings of optimism and belonging are a direct result of authentic experiences. Infusing the classroom with resiliency-building experiences can have a profound impact on students' self images.